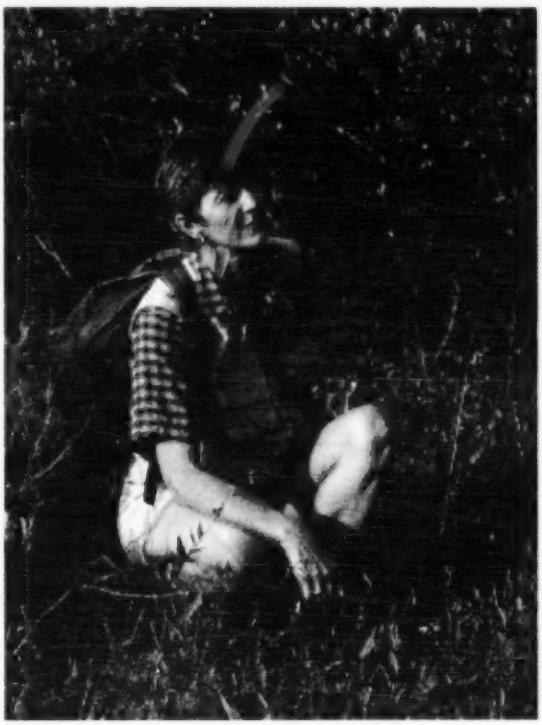
Column 425

Interpreting the Tombstones

by Sarah Locke

For two decades, naturalists working in the Tombstones have made the most of the small funky trailer that houses the interpretive centre. Crammed full of dried plants, rock specimens, guide books, maps and other reference materials, the centre is almost bursting at the seams with information.

Within a year, the interpreters should be working out of more spacious quarters as construction is supposed to start this summer on a new centre. Julie Frisch, who manages the interpretive program in the Tombstones, says she looks forward to having more space, but also does not want to lose the intimacy of the old centre.



Julie Frisch has worked as an interpreter in the Tombstone area for more than a decade.
(photo: Government of Yukon)

"People love our centre because it is so small and because the interpreters are not isolated behind a counter," she says. "We want to keep the idea alive that this is more of a field station than just a place to get maps. We want to interact with the public, not just hand out information."

The old centre is also part and parcel of Frisch's family history. Even though she now lives in Whitehorse, she still has a home near the south end of the Dempster Highway, where she once lived year-round. When Frisch started working in the Tombstones more than a decade ago, her young daughter, Sylvia, was often by her side.

"She grew up on the job," says Frisch, and as soon as Sylvia was old enough to work, she also became an interpreter. Now age 22, she is working part-time at the centre this summer.

But the Frisch connection with the Tombstone interpretive centre goes back to its very start, and even though it is not a happy story, Julie Frisch does not hesitate to trace this history.

"The centre first opened when Bob died," says Frisch, referring to her deceased

husband Robert Frisch, author of *Birds by the Dempster Highway*. He had moved to the area in 1970, and was renowned for his epic solo journeys through the Tombstone region. An "old school naturalist" who learned through his own field experiences, he was enamoured with all aspects of the area's natural history, but is perhaps best remembered as the first person to locate the nests of Surfbirds in Canada.

On June 21, 1985, two Yukon biologists were on their way to the Frisch's home to ask if Bob Frisch could help out in the new centre. They found his body by the side of the driveway. He had died of a heart attack at age 55.

Frisch describes Bob as the "initial roving Dempster interpreter." He often hitchhiked along the highway, and used these moments to tell people about the area. "And I've always found it interesting that here he dies and the interpretive centre is born at the same time," she says.

Originally from Minnesota, Frisch moved to the Yukon in 1975, but says it was unplanned. "When I first came to the Yukon I was on my way to Oregon to do an Outward Bound course for people working with kids out-of-doors." Her degree is in child development and humanities, and she describes herself as a self-taught naturalist who has "learned from the field and from other field naturalists as opposed to academic training."

Last year she and other park interpreters helped more than 8,500 tourists who stopped by the Tombstone interpretive centre. That number could double in the coming years as Holland America is now offering a day trip to the Tombstones for its clients who travel to Dawson City.

Tombstone Territorial Park is attracting an increasing number of visitors every year.

(photo: Government of Yukon)

During the day, the interpreters answer visitors' questions in the centre, and Frisch says she looks forward to being stumped. "It is often exciting for visitors when you do not know the answer to a question, and then you can look up the answer and learn something together," she says.

Evening hikes offer another chance to connect with visitors, and Frisch says visitors' questions often spark discussions on the hikes, but she also has her own goals.

"My mission is to help people get back in touch with the fact that they are a part of the natural world. I think people are feeling so displaced -- in their jobs, in their cities, in their lifestyles, in their vehicles -- that they kind of forget that we are natural organisms and we are part of nature and it is all interconnected.

"And what I want is not for everybody to have to move to the woods, but for people to be able to sit in their backyards, and connect with what they are."

"You just want to get people to open their eyes and to feel touched," she adds. "So many people tell us that an evening hike with us has been the experience of a lifetime and is something they will never forget.

"Often what touches you is just seeing people walking off after a hike and just standing there, feeling the land coming up through the ground and into their soles, into their souls."

Frisch was a member of the committee that helped draft a management plan for Tombstone Territorial Park, which was established in 2004. This work gave her the chance to learn more about the area's cultural history, and she tries to show visitors how the human and natural history of the region are closely connected.

"It is also so important for people from away to see that people in the North still do live closely connected to the land here. It is not just something that was done in the past," she says.

As an example, she mentions Tr'ondek Hwech'in elder Annie Henry's preference for water from Wolf Creek, a tributary of the North Klondike River. On trips into town, Frisch often stops and collects water for both herself and Henry, who now lives in Dawson City. As Henry is more than 100 years old and her husband, Joe Henry, also lived for more than a century, Frisch figures drinking Wolf Creek water could well be the key to a long and happy life.

"She says it is better than the water anywhere else," says Frisch.

The Tombstone interpretive centre is now open for the season, and in two weeks visitors can learn more about the Tombstone's rich bird life during "Weekend on the Wing," which will be held from June 10-12. For more information contact Dennis Kuch at (867) 667-8299 or check the Yukon government wildlife viewing website at www.environmentyukon.gov.yk.ca/viewing.

Environment Canada
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